

**NANBAN:
A CENTER FOR
STREET AND WORKING
CHILDREN**

Brother S. James

Touched by the plight of the vulnerable children and young people in the city of Madurai in South India and the injustice perpetrated against them, the De La Salle Brothers - India have come forward to promote care and concern for these unfortunate youth through the Nanban (meaning friends) project.

Nanban believes that none of its activities should become a kind of "charitable blanket" covering the disease in society which produces these children. Any activity undertaken on behalf of these children should help society to diagnose its disease. Nanban adopts three types of strategy to implement the services, namely a street-based approach, centre-based approach and community-based approach, promoting the prevention, protection and rehabilitation of street and working children. The two centres, one for boys and another for girls, act as catalysts for the transition from street to home or society. The target group is boys and girls under 15 years of age who work, eat and sleep on the streets only. If the life of a street girl is as difficult as that of a boy, she is nevertheless more vulnerable because she is female. Her life on the street is twice as exploitable and oppressive as that of a boy.

Working side by side with the laity

● **In the street.**

The street educators go to the children in their places of work or hangouts to talk with them and establish the first link. The educator identifies the leaders among the street children and makes use of them as a reference point.

● **At the Centre.**

Nanban has realised that mere provision of shelter will not solve the problems. Therefore the centre-based approach aims to:

- Check the immediate factors causing a self-destructive life-style.
- Instill confidence and create an awareness of the importance of basic ethical, spiritual and cultural values.
- Deal with the emotional needs of the street children and nurture their spiritual dimension giving a true sense of meaning and hope.

● **With the community.**

Nanban aims to build movement towards meaningful social and political action, capable of challenging situations that leave children abandoned on the streets. It is an active campaigner on a wide range

of child-related issues. Nanban attempts to influence government policy and legislation in favour of street and working children and their rights. In an attempt to involve the society at large, especially the young, a youth for youth programme has been initiated by the Centre.

Nanban's achievements

Within a short time, Nanban has been able to assist 950 children. Some of them come from Madurai city but the majority have migrated from various districts and from neighbouring States. Through the following programmes, Nanban has to date succeeded in:

- Home placement: restoring 485 children to their parents; contacting the parents and follow-up is done for 64 children.
- School placement: 47 children in the schools; 7 boys in the technical institutions; 10 children in a free boarding school and 11 children in the foster children programme.
- Job mobility: 81 children have been initiated under this programme. The job mobility scheme sponsored by Nanban has started paying dividends. With a capital investment of Rs. 25/- the children are sent out with goods for sale. This has infused a sense of confidence among them and there is a spectacular change in them. Those who earlier shunned water are now having regular baths and are wearing clean clothes, to look presentable. This is not a step by step programme but rather an inch by inch programme.

Staff improvement programme

A regular staff improvement programme is organised to bring the staff to a better understanding of their responsibility and to strengthen their commitment. Field exposure in other states has been provided and the staff has had several chances to attend seminars and workshops at national and state level. Every Saturday, the staff meets for an internal evaluation which is done on 3 levels: administration, staff and programme.

A principle guiding us in this work should be flexibility. We have to be flexible, i.e., capable of changing and adapting, because the societies in which street children live are constantly changing as a result of internal and external developments and we must in turn respond to these changes if we are to provide relevant assistance. The dialogue between staff is useful only if we are willing to evaluate our work, renew our approach and even drastically change it if it does prove to be beneficial to the children. Our exchanges should lead to regular updating of our work as we continue our attempts to find better approaches to dealing with the problem of street children. ●

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